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Title of paper:

Cuba's internationalism: participant narratives and the role of Cuban universities in supporting educational aid.

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Summary:

In this paper, I discuss Cuba's educational aid to partner countries of the Global South. The paper draws on narratives of participant experiences to show how this aid is implemented, and following this, analyses what these narratives imply about Cuba's philosophy of internationalist solidarity, and its organisation of aid. On one hand, accounts from Cuban educators give insight into the challenges of teaching overseas. On the other hand, accounts of professionals from developing countries in the Global South allow us to reflect on the lasting impact on their careers and mindsets of having studied in Cuban universities on scholarships from Cuba. I discuss how these narratives reveal the underlying role of the socially responsible university in Cuba, pointing to how universities support Cuban internationalism in its contribution to key development goals.

Introduction

In this paper, I discuss Cuba's educational aid to partner countries of the Global South. My study is based on using narratives of people's experiences to show how this aid is implemented. I also show how, in Cuba, the socially responsible university supports the Cuban internationalism described in these narratives.

Cuban assistance to overseas countries, especially in Africa and Latin America, consists mainly of the work of thousands of highly trained professionals in many fields – doctors, engineers, agriculturalists, teachers, literacy workers, university professors and administrators. These Cuban professionals have been trained in the extensive university system that has been developed as a key part of the Cuban revolution. Cuba also assists

through a massive scholarship program that gives foreign students from poor societies scholarships to Cuban universities and polytechnics and schools. About 50,000 of these scholarships were given between 1973 and 2009, of which 16,500 were at universities), and about 18,000 scholarships were given to educate children at Cuban schools between 1978 and 1995 (Martin Sabina and Vina Brito, 2010). This builds the capacity of countries to improve their education, society and culture.

As I have demonstrated with my co-authors in a recent book, *'The Capacity to Share: A Study of Cuba's International Cooperation in Educational Development'* (Hickling-Hudson, Corona Gonzalez and Preston 2012), examples of Cuba's significant global role in education come not only from statistics, but also from narratives. Accounts from Cuban educators give insight into the challenges of teaching overseas and organizing international educational projects with countries of the Global South. Accounts of professionals from developing countries allow us to reflect on the lasting impact on their careers and mindsets of having studied in Cuba. Such narratives draw attention to the significance of Cuba's style of educational globalism in its contribution to key development goals. In all the narratives, it is clear that Cuba's university system makes possible the collaboration of Cubans with others across the globe in improving health, education and the capacity of societies to make progress.

The paper is a conceptual analysis of selected narratives of people I have interviewed about their experiences of Cuban internationalism in education either as educators, or as students in Cuban universities on scholarships from Cuba, people who now work in professional careers in their own countries. I explain how information from narratives such as these enables me to analyse key features of the Cuban and South-South solidarity through educational aid. The objective of my paper is to answer these questions:

1. How do participant narratives illustrate people's lived experiences of Cuban internationalism in education?
2. How can these narratives be analyzed to provide an understanding of the Cuban policy of solidarity?

3. What light do the narratives throw on the Cuban university contribution to the solidarity policy?

Perspectives / Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial theory provides me with the lens to examine the patterns of Cuba's educational aid as an example of an alternative policy approach that has the potential of tackling the destructive social patterns left by colonialism's global legacy of huge disparities and gaps in education (Tikly 2009, Rizvi 2009). The per capita expenditure of rich countries on education is twenty-six times that of the educational expenditure of poor countries, and educational aid to poorer countries is extremely small (Klees 2010). That gap cannot easily be overcome. Therefore, alternatives to the neo-liberalism that continually widens the gap are increasingly important. The success of the Cuban model of education (see Gasperini 2000, Breidlid 2007, Carnoy, Gove and Marshall 2007), which springs from alternative, socialist philosophies, demonstrates that a low-income country can achieve the vision of equitable and high-quality education. This model not only delivers education of a high quality, it also is unusual in the extent to which it shares the benefits of this education with other developing countries.

As part of the chosen framework of postcolonial theory, I utilized the qualitative methodology of narrative research. This was important for my investigation of Cuban internationalism in education, since it gave me the first point of access to a program in an unfamiliar culture. Qualitative methods of narrative investigation and analysis suited my research situation, which had the characteristics of being on a small scale, and of long duration, taking place over the past fifteen years. Narrative is understood as 'a reconstruction of experience, by which, through a reflective process, meaning is given to what happened or was lived' (Bolívar 2000). The narratives become the 'texts' of the educational experience, where the temporal and biographical dimensions occupy a central position. As Fox (2008) points out, narrative methodology 'allows the researcher and the researched systematically to illuminate individual life perceptions, undertake cultural analysis, probe social-historical phenomena and critically reflect on the processes of the research. In

the diverse socio-cultural and economic contexts of education globally, such a qualitative approach to comparative and international research creates the spaces for listening to and heeding the voices of experience across borders’.

Accepted categories of educational policy analysis (see Ball 1997) include negotiations between countries, conceptualizations of aid, forms of provision, patterns of access, forms of work and study, and values and ethics. The narrative data allowed me to examine these categories, and I interpreted them in terms of the light they threw on Cuban policy as a postcolonial alternative to neo-liberal policy in educational aid.

Methods and points of enquiry

In nine visits to Cuba over fifteen years, I researched the lives and experiences of individual participants to understand the philosophy and organizational principles of the internationalist policy and program in education. My analysis of themes in the various narratives clarified on the one hand the workings of the program’s elements such as scholarships, the lending of Cuban experts to assist overseas universities and schools, the preparation of Cuban teachers for overseas work, and on the other hand, the relationship between these elements and the experiences of Cuban administrators and teachers, and of overseas students. Qualitative enquiry enabled me as a researcher to obtain a rich and detailed picture of these selected components of the program, and to develop an analysis of how they related to each other. The present paper presents only a small segment of my research. The methods used to gather and conceptually analyse data from interviewees included:

- semi-structured and / or unstructured interviews with participants, some of several hours in length and others of less than an hour
- audio-taping augmented by personal note-taking in these interviews
- transcription and analysis of the themes that emerged from interviews
- discussion, within a theoretical framework of policy analysis, of these themes

Where the narrative data was insufficient to answer my questions concerning policy, I sought further information from additional interviewees, although this

aspect of the research is beyond the scope of the present paper.

Data sources and evidence

The data sources in this research were narrative interviews with Cuban teachers and professors, program managers, or overseas scholarship students at Cuban universities. I discuss the experiences of the following people whom I interviewed:

- Two Cuban teachers who taught in Angola and Jamaica
- Selected professionals from the English-speaking Caribbean who studied in degree and diploma programs at universities and colleges in Cuba
- A Cuban adult literacy expert who has worked in many countries to launch collaborative literacy programs based on a Cuban pedagogical model

Results and discussion

The narratives of my interviewees gave me insight into various aspects of Cuban educational aid.

i) The experiences of two teachers

Two Cuban educators talk about their experiences while teaching overseas. Marta Fernández Cabrera describes the experience of going as a young professor of English studies to teach at a university in Angola during the 1980s war between Angola and apartheid-dominated South Africa. Her narrative gives an insight of the wartime danger that constantly surrounded the volunteer teachers, as well as the excitement of their opportunities to teach and learn in an unfamiliar and challengingly different culture (Fernandez Cabrera in Hickling-Hudson et al 2012).

Emelina Pérez Herrera talks of the initial dissonance that she felt on leaving her professorial post in English studies at a Cuban university to teach Spanish for two years in the late 1990s at a government high school in a remote mountain community in rural Jamaica. She soon threw herself into the challenges of teaching Spanish in an innovative way, through activities in

drama, dancing, a Spanish language club, and a Spanish interschool camp. She was faced with the poverty of some of the families of school students, and the fact that some of them, although adolescents, were not literate (Perez Herrera in Hickling-Hudson et al, 2012).

Both Pérez and Fernández still work as professors of education in Cuba, and see their overseas postings as a highlight of their teaching careers.

The role of the Cuban university in supporting countries which asked for help was clear in both these experiences. Fernández Cabrera recounts that in 1983: 'I was chosen by my university in Cuba to join the Pedagogical Detachment "Frank Pais" as an internationalist worker, and I was asked to work at the University of Angola in the Pedagogical Institute...Department of Foreign Languages'. Some fifteen years later, in the late 1990s, Pérez Herrera was granted two years leave from her role as a university professor of English at the pedagogical university in Havana, and was placed as a teacher of Spanish in a Jamaican high school. These are but two examples of how Cuban universities work with their national government to support their country's internationalism. As is pointed out by Lidia Turner Marti, 'When Cuban professors leave their posts in Cuba to do this collaborative work, there is a cost to the Cuban government. It continues to pay our salary while we are away. Our colleagues in Cuba cover our work while we are teaching overseas' (Turner Marti in Hickling-Hudson et al, 2012, p 265).

ii) The experiences of selected professionals who obtained their degrees and diplomas at universities and colleges in Cuba

Between 1996 and 2011, I interviewed a number of Cuban-educated graduates working in four Caribbean countries – Jamaica, Grenada, St. Lucia and Guyana. This gave an insight into the kind of study and research they had completed for their degrees in Cuba, and how this prepared them for working as Caribbean professionals in engineering, medicine, agronomy, veterinary science, teaching, physical education, media studies and community work. The theme of the work-study degree, and the graduates' understanding of how their education influenced their work as professionals – are illustrated by

a few examples from these interviews (Hickling-Hudson in Hickling-Hudson et al, 2012).

All of the graduates explained how their university carried out the goal of integrating theory and study with practical, reflective work in their particular discipline. The subjects studied in the degree were combined with annual work placements that introduced students to every aspect of the job, including the manual work that in many other countries is likely to be regarded as unsuitable for university students. The narratives of these graduates indicated that the Cuban university degree provides students with an education that is strong in interweaving theory and practice. The foundations of higher education in Cuba are the three pillars of *Académico, Laboral e Investigación*—academic study, labour, and research. Most degree courses are five-years in length, ending with a research component (medicine takes longer). Labour of a different sort, that is, non-academic manual work, is also expected of students for two weeks each year. Overseas students are told that, for them, this is on a voluntary basis. This usually takes the form of assisting with food production, sometimes for student meals, in the fields or in the university kitchens, and sometimes in the general agricultural harvest.

Work placements, supervised by professionals approved by the university, provided experience in the practical side of production at factories, farms, and enterprises. Most international students in Cuba are studying the sciences and medicine, fields in which university places are particularly limited in their own countries. However, I interviewed people who had graduated in other fields as well, for example, modern languages, education and film studies. The language graduate related how she became fluently tri-lingual by adding French and Spanish to her native English. Her work placements were in libraries, at Radio Havana's news desk, and in conferences that required instantaneous translation. The education graduate did his practical work in schools during each year of his five-year degree, specializing in methods of teaching Spanish both to foreigners and to Spanish speakers, while academically he specialized in the literatures of Spain and Latin America. The young woman who had done a diploma program in film studies at the

International Film and Television 'School of the Three Worlds' described how film students were required to complete a 'polyvalent' process, taking part in several aspects of the film production process while specializing in one skill, such as sound engineering, production, or cinematography (Hickling-Hudson and Springer 2012).

Reflecting on how the Cuban degree had influenced their work as professionals, the graduates felt that their Cuban education had deliberately trained them to be a certain kind of professional, one who is oriented toward researching the needs of people or of industries in a particular field, and gearing his or her career toward meeting these needs. Especially striking was the Jamaican doctor who made it his business to penetrate deep rural areas, sometimes in peasant mode on the back of a donkey or on foot, to talk with people about public health. The closeness of study with work placements geared the graduates toward thinking about what their own countries could do to increase the production of food, non-traditional crops, or goods and services (Hickling-Hudson in Hickling-Hudson et al, 2012). The two Cuban-trained linguists were applying their skills to a variety of linguistic fields spanning teaching, interpreting, training students to interpret, helping with teacher training, and a community-oriented business consultancy. The film graduate is the director of her own Barbados-based media production company that provides multimedia products and services in the Caribbean.

iii) The experiences of an adult literacy expert who has worked in many countries to launch collaborative literacy programs based on a Cuban pedagogical model

My interview with a Jaime Canfux, a Cuban adult literacy expert who had both organised and taught in literacy programs overseas for more than thirty years, provided insights into the Cuban organization of literacy and post-literacy programs in many countries, and into the variety of methods used, including printed texts, radio and television. Canfux explained what was involved in each of the three pillars of the Cuban method of adult literacy education: mass programs, high quality programs, and low cost programs. He also explained how the principles of solidarity operated in adult literacy: that is: the teaching

method (technology transfer) is freely given, and the rest of the cost is shared between Cuba and the particular country, depending on their possibilities. For example, in the case of Venezuela, Cuba provided the method, the TV sets and the booklets required to teach the program, and Venezuela paid for the transport costs accommodation, and personal expense allowances for the Cuban advisers. However, in the case of Haiti, one of the poorest countries in the Americas, the whole literacy program is provided by Cuba with Haiti incurring only a minimal cost. Again, in adult literacy, the Cuban university educates language and literacy professionals who become experts in organizing a highly effective collaborative adult literacy program in many partner countries including Angola, Mozambique, Sao Tome, Cape Verde, Grenada and Nicaragua from the 1970s to the 1990s, and Nigeria, Haiti and Venezuela after the 1990s (Canfux Gutierrez in Hickling-Hudson et al, 2012, pp. 255-261).

Policy analysis based on data from the narratives

Data from the narratives provided me with clear themes that illuminate the implementation and the significance of Cuba's educational assistance to countries of the Global South. The themes facilitate policy analysis.

The experiences of the Cuban teachers overseas gave insights into how decolonizing countries can benefit from Cuba's assistance in building teaching capacity, while Cuba in turn benefits from developing the expertise of its educators through this internationalist work. The account of the Cuban adult literacy expert gave a picture not only of the collaborative teaching and organizational methods that underpin the Cuban literacy program in many countries, but also of the philosophy of solidarity which provides literacy programs free of charge to the poorest countries, and as a cooperative exchange program with countries that can afford to cover some costs. The narratives of the international graduates who had studied in Cuba on higher education scholarships showed (i) how they, as students, gained both the theoretical foundations of their field and an intensive practical and local experience of its implementation and (ii) how they utilized this knowledge as professionals in their own countries.

Cubans see their internationalism as being based on the principle of 'solidarity', explained as giving assistance to others in a collaborative way, in areas that its partners have requested, negotiating mutual support according to the situation of the individual countries involved (see Corona Gonzalez, Hickling-Hudson and Lehr, in Hickling-Hudson et al, 2012). The philosophy of solidarity is the motivation for internationalism, but this policy can only be carried out because of the commitment of the Cuban universities to providing both Cuban and international students with an education that prepares them to become socially responsible professionals.

The ability of the Cuban government to carry out its internationalist policies in education rests on the revolution's expansion of the system of education. Cuba became one of the few developing countries to achieve, in the second half of the 20th century, universal primary and secondary schooling of a high quality, universal adult literacy, a network of universities and polytechnic schools throughout the country, and a deep cultural and practical link between university and society. Cuba's university / higher education network is well developed, and in spite of its recent reduction in size to allow for the expansion of polytechnic education, it maintains its ability to absorb increasing numbers of internationally mobile students (see Martin Sabina, Corona Gonzalez and Hickling-Hudson 2012).

The findings of my research and that of my colleagues showed the human experiences involved in Cuba's pioneering system of educational assistance to other poor countries. The centralized planning of Cuba's socialist economy makes it possible for the government to work with the universities to make decisions about the level of expenditure on international scholarships, and about how many university professors can be 'loaned' temporarily to provide assistance with academic and administrative projects. But it is the philosophy of solidarity, a hallmark of the Cuban revolution, together with the material strength of the education system, especially its universities, that provides a foundation for Cuban internationalism.

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